

Page Denied

Director of Central Intelligence



Special National Intelligence Estimate

MASTER FILE COPY

**DO NOT GIVE OUT
OR MARK ON**

~~Secret~~

25X1

Likelihood of a Syrian-Israeli War

Key Judgments

~~Secret~~

*SNIE 36.7/35-86W
July 1986*

Copy 43

THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

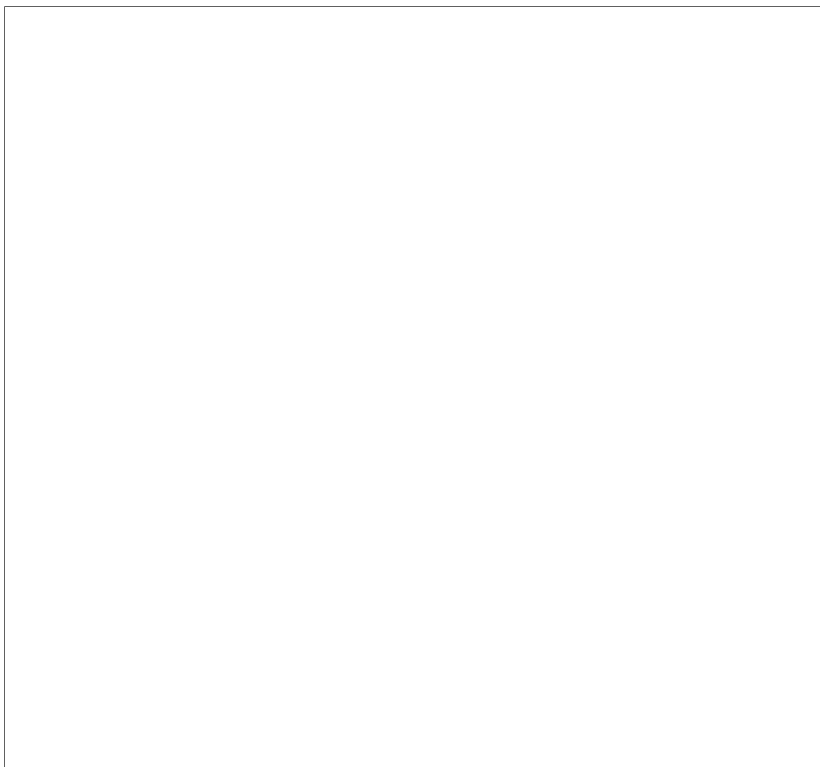
Also Participating:

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps



25X1

SECRET

25X1

SNIE 36.7/35-86W

**LIKELIHOOD OF A
SYRIAN-ISRAELI WAR**

KEY JUDGMENTS

The full text of this Estimate
is being published separately
with regular distribution.

SECRET

SECRET

25X1

KEY JUDGMENTS

The prospects are high that before the end of this decade a Syrian-Israeli conflict will occur—possibly full-scale war—which would have major implications for US interests:

- Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad is determined to press the Arab struggle against Israel, to achieve a “strategic parity” which would create a credible military option, and to recover the Golan Heights. President Assad’s pursuit of “strategic parity” means not only building a credible military deterrent, but also increasing Syria’s diplomatic leverage. Assad believes Syria cannot preserve its regional clout, its influence over any Arab-Israeli peace process, and leading hardline role on the Palestinian issue unless he can preserve a credible military option. Volatile pressures will result particularly from Syria’s efforts to diminish Israel’s residual influence in Lebanon, and Syria’s continuing sponsorship of terrorist acts.
- For its part, Israel seeks to maintain military preeminence over any combination of Arab forces, to defend its territorial integrity, and to guarantee its long-term survival. Volatile pressures will result particularly from growing sentiment among the Israelis that their forces should launch preventive strikes to destroy the threat of Syria’s growing power.

25X1

Neither Israel nor Syria is eager for a major clash in the near term, but there will remain considerable danger that such a clash may occur, either through accident or design. Furthermore, recent events have increased odds for a clash, as well as the risk that hostilities will be harder to control. In periods of high tension, events could well unfold very quickly, with both sides—but Israel in particular—seeing compelling advantages to acting swiftly and massively.

25X1

Whatever the case for the near term, the risks of conflict will intensify over the next few years:

- Assad believes US support for Israel and Israel’s military superiority makes a satisfactory negotiated settlement impossible; he sees military force—or at least the threat of war—as Syria’s only realistic long-term option. Although we lack good information regarding Syrian war plans, we believe Assad is trying to develop the capability to mount a surprise attack on

SECRET

25X1

the Golan, hoping Syria would achieve limited territorial successes and a cease-fire would be implemented before Israel had fully mobilized its reserves.

- We do know that Assad has pushed hard to develop a deterrent to prevent Israeli retaliation against Syria's infrastructure: this deterrent includes chemical weapons and surface-to-surface missiles. There is an outside chance he would use such weapons if, in a full-scale war, Israel were wreaking massive destruction within Syria.
- For their part, the Israelis are very worried by Assad's dogged pursuit of "strategic parity." They see it as narrowing their military options and threatening their maintenance of an effective deterrent. The true depth of their concern is difficult to assess because they have several reasons to exaggerate the Syrian threat. But Israel has definitely not lost the will or ability to move boldly to defeat Syria. If Israel should become convinced that war is imminent or that the Syrian buildup had reached intolerable levels, we believe the Government of Israel—whether Labor or Likud—would not hesitate to launch a massive attack designed to destroy Syrian forces quickly while minimizing Israeli losses.
- The Israelis believe—and we agree—that they could quickly halt a surprise Syrian attack and move to the offensive. Despite Syria's achievement of rough numerical parity in the last few years, Israel has retained—and most analysts believe will increase—its overall superiority. In the event of a full-scale Israeli ground offensive, we estimate that the Syrian Army would be thoroughly defeated within no more than two weeks.

25X1

As for the prior detection of war preparations:

- *The Israelis' ability to monitor and analyze Syrian preparations for war has declined somewhat in the past year, but is still excellent*

25X1
25X1

- *Syrian capability to monitor Israeli preparations for an attack is poor.*
- The US ability to detect and evaluate preparations for war between Israel and Syria has declined during the past year,

SECRET

25X1

[redacted] The US capability remains fair to good, but *we will continue to have difficulty providing timely, unambiguous warning of an Israeli-Syrian war* [redacted]

25X1

25X1

US leverage. The United States has little leverage over Syria. The United States has only limited influence on Israel's calculations, and we believe Israeli leaders, if convinced of an imminent Syrian threat, would be prepared to initiate hostilities without US acquiescence. A Labor government would be more likely than Likud to seek at least tacit US approval. [redacted]

25X1

The USSR. We doubt that Assad would give or agree to any Soviet role in a decision to attack the Golan Heights. The Soviets would likely oppose a Syrian decision to attack, fearing Damascus would suffer a major defeat. Nonetheless, in the event of war the Soviets would almost immediately begin military resupply. The Soviets might also send a small military force to Syria, but this would only be considered in the context of an Israeli march on Damascus or if the Syrian regime was on the verge of collapse. [redacted]

25X1

Other Arab states. For the remainder of the decade, no Arab state is likely to provide significant military support to Syria in a war. A conflict would almost certainly involve Lebanese territory and airspace, but it is much less likely that Jordan would be drawn in. Aside from Lebanon and Jordan, Egypt would be the Arab state most affected by a conflict: Cairo would be compelled to freeze its relations with Israel, even if Syria were the unequivocal aggressor and were rapidly defeated. We believe a future conflict could cause some internal problems for moderate Arab states but would not lead to any regime's collapse. [redacted]

25X1

On the whole, any major conflict between Syria and Israel would adversely affect US interests:

- It would spur more terrorism.
- To the extent Arab states rallied behind Syria, the United States would, at least over the short term, lose influence with its moderate allies, particularly Egypt and Saudi Arabia, due to Washington's close identification with Israel.
- A triumphant Israel would have even less incentive to make concessions to the Arabs.
- Syria probably would call for, and doubtless succeed in, convening an Arab summit on the Arab-Israeli issue with strong anti-US overtones. [redacted]

25X1

SECRET

25X1

On the potentially positive side:

- As in 1973, a war might be a catalyst for serious movement in the peace process. The United States, still the only major power that can engage in a meaningful dialogue with each side, would almost certainly be the mediator should a dialogue emerge.
- If the war resulted in a rapid Israeli victory, the United States might profit from the strategic shift resulting from the loss of Syrian power and influence, and a Syria that had suffered a devastating defeat would be less able to stymie future US peace efforts or to threaten US allies in the region.

25X1

Page Denied